Sacred Matters
Religion and Spirituality in Families

Wesley R. Burr
Brigham Young University, USA

Loren D. Marks
Louisiana State University, USA

Randal D. Day
Brigham Young University, USA
Burr, Wesley R., 1936-  
Sacred matters : religion and spirituality in families / Wesley R. Burr, Loren D. Marks, Randal D. Day.  
p. cm.  
Summary: "Sacred Matters builds on earlier literature, adds new qualitative and quantitative data, and creates a conceptual framework and general theory (or model) about when, how, and why sacred matters are helpful and harmful in families"-- Provided by publisher.  
Includes bibliographical references and index.  

BV4526.3.B875 2011  
249--dc23  
2011020598

Visit the Taylor & Francis Web site at  
http://www.taylorandfrancis.com

and the Psychology Press Web site at  
http://www.psypress.com
Contents

Preface vii

1 Overview and Main Ideas in Sacred Theory 1
2 Forgiving 35
3 Asking and Seeking 53
4 Sacrificing 69
5 Loving Others 87
6 Aspects of Loving 101
7 Coping With Disagreements 123
8 Coping With Undesirable Behavior 147
9 Loving God 161
10 Generations 175
11 Morality 185
12 Psychosocial Aspects 195
13 Relationships With Other Perspectives 213
14 Researching Sacred Matters 243
15 Methods 263

References 289

Author Index 313

Subject Index 321
Preface

This book provides new research and a theory about ways the sacred parts of the human experience help and harm families. The research used multiple methods to gather qualitative and quantitative data from samples that included different religions, different stages of the life cycle, and different geographical areas. The findings led to an innovative conceptual framework and a theory that provides new, useful, and testable insights about how, when, and why sacred matters make a difference in families.

The book provides considerable evidence that when family members use sacred-based principles wisely it makes a difference in the quality of their lives, and it makes more difference than most theories in family studies suggest. All of the previous theories have truth and value, but they also are limited by the dominant assumptions in academia that emphasize the secular. The theory constructed in this volume complements the earlier theories, and when it is integrated with them it enriches and expands them.

The primary audiences for this book are scholars and students who are interested in better understanding why some families succeed and others fail. Researchers and practitioners in fields such as family studies, psychology, religion, philosophy, social work, and sociology will find that the ideas in this volume expand and enrich the ideas in their previous bodies of literature and describe new areas for research. Most family and religion texts pay little attention to the role of the sacred in families. Therefore this volume expands and improves graduate and undergraduate courses in religion and family, family studies, and programs that focus on family relationships, family processes, family development, and family therapy. It also enriches courses on religion and family, philosophy of religion, psychology of the family, sociology of the family, social work, and counseling.

The theory in this volume is called sacred theory, and it has four general ideas and a group of less general principles. Several of the less general propositions have been included in family studies in the last several decades. They deal with forgiveness, sacrifice, prayer, and sanctification, but these ideas have not been integrated into a more general framework. We review what has been learned about them, integrate the findings into a broader framework and theory, and describe a number of other principles about sacred matters that have not been included before in family studies.

Sacred theory is like the tip of an iceberg. It describes a group of sacred-based principles that can be easily identified, easily translated into the language of
scholarly inquiry, and added to the field. There also are many other ideas about the sacred that are like the part of an iceberg below the surface. They are not as easily seen and described, and many of them are so complex they are not easily translated from the language of faith into the language of academia. We hope many of them will eventually be included in family studies.

Sacred matters generate strong emotions, and each person’s background and approach influences how he or she responds to the sacred parts of life. Therefore it seems wise to share some of our experiences and beliefs because they have influenced this book. All three of us are husbands and fathers, and our families and the heritage and interaction in our extended families are important and precious parts of our lives. We are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (The Mormon Church); and we have devoted considerable energy to learning about other religions by studying their bodies of literature, attending services, taking classes on world religions, and talking with many people in a variety of contexts about their views of the sacred. We are impressed with how much the many world religions have in common, and we believe each of them enriches humanity and has a great deal of value and truth. We also believe that no religion has a monopoly on truth and wisdom, and that all of them, including the church we belong to, have limitations and inadequacies. These views and our search for ideas that can help families led us to focus in this book on ideas that are widely shared by many religions rather than ideas that are provincial, controversial, fragmenting, or divisive.

Some readers may wonder what motivated us to write a book such as this, and our motives are easy to explain. We believe family life can be among the best and most wonderful and beautiful parts of the human experience; but it also can be among the worst and most painful and tragic parts. Family studies will become more relevant and helpful when the sacred becomes a more important part of the field, and this book is our attempt to help this happen.

The first chapter describes the four ideas that are the main assertions in sacred theory. The next 11 chapters describe less general propositions that are integrated with the four general ideas. Most of the less general principles are parts of an idea that is a central belief in most of the views of the sacred. It is the idea that people ought to love each other rather than relate in ways that emphasize such things as control, acquisition, manipulation, achieving, competing, independence, hedonism, exchange, fame, power, or fortune. However, the term love has many meanings, and we suggest that most of the ways this term is used have little to do with the sacred or the quality of marriages and families. Many of these differences deal with whether people view love as a noun or verb. These differences are analyzed in Chapter 5, and Chapters 6 through 8 then describe what our data suggest about what it means to be loving in families and how love as a verb makes a great deal of difference in families. There also are a number of principles in these chapters that deal with other aspects of family life, and we describe ways all of these principles can be applied by family members and professionals who work with families.

Chapters 13 and 14 are culminating chapters because they summarize, analyze, integrate, test, and look toward the future. Chapter 13 begins by describing how the ideas in sacred theory can be integrated with other theories such as symbolic interaction, transition theory, behaviorism, systems theories, and humanistic
perspectives. We then describe seven competing ideologies that have emerged in nonsacred perspectives. These ideologies are compared with the ideas in sacred theory, and we describe how some of the competing ideas contribute to undesirable outcomes in families. We suggest that the competing ideas exact a high toll in families, but their role is not well understood by scholars, policy makers, or families because the study of the sacred has been so excluded from scholarly inquiry.

In Chapter 14 we describe new quantitative research that uses longitudinal data from the Flourishing Families Project at BYU. The findings corroborate several of the ideas in sacred theory, and suggest that commitment is more important than we previously thought. This chapter also describes a number of research projects that deserve attention in the future.

The usual pattern is to discuss the methods early in publications, but we describe our methods in the back of the book in Chapter 15. Our approach is like putting a tool shed in the backyard rather than the front yard. This way the tools are there for those who want them, and they don’t interfere with the view in the front yard.

Additional information about the metaphysical, ontological, epistemological, paradigmatic, and definitional assumptions and agendas that underlie our theorizing and research can be found at http://familycenter.byu.edu/Assumptions.dhtml. Click on “Assumptions in Sacred Theory.”

We appreciate the help and support of many people as we have worked on this project. Our wives, children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and extended families are the most precious and helpful parts of our lives and work, and we do not have words to adequately express how deeply we feel our appreciation for them. We also appreciate the support of the School of Family Life and the Family Study Center at BYU and School of Human Ecology at LSU.

We appreciate the scholars whose previous work laid the groundwork for this volume. This includes those who contributed to the Contemporary Theories About the Family volumes and the two Sourcebooks on family theory and methods. It also includes many years of creative and cumulative scholarship by a group of colleagues at Bowling Green University. This group has been led by Annette Mahoney and Kenneth Pargament. We also appreciate the work, friendship, support, and advice of David Dollahite and those who have assisted him in his research. We are also grateful for our collaboration with Kathleen Bahr in several projects over many years and for the volume she published with Howard Bahr titled Toward More Family-Centered Family Sciences. Their book was in many ways foundational to our work.

We appreciate Bert Adams, Terry Baker, Mae Blanch, Pauline Boss, Mark Butler, Tom Draper, Ralph Hancock, Sam Hardy, Alan Hawkins, Tom Holman, Stan Knapp, Brent Melling, Joe Ostenson, Emily Reynolds, Darwin Thomas, Richard Williams, and Brent Yorgason for the ways they assisted this project. They advised, encouraged, consulted, reacted, and suggested many useful ideas. Several groups of students at BYU and LSU were also thoughtful and creative in helping us find ways to improve the ideas in this book.

We are also thankful for the many ways Debra Riegert, Andrea Zekus, and Marsha Hecht at Routledge/Taylor & Francis have been helpful and for reviews of
manuscript by Gina M. Brelsford, William Doherty, David Dollahite, W. Bradford Wilcox, and three other anonymous reviewers. These reviews were provided by the publisher and were unusually helpful. Our writing also benefited from editorial help by Jennifer Koski, Joy Stubbs, and Yaxin Lu. And, last but not least, none of this would have been possible without the contributions of the many people who shared their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in our interviews and discussions. They contributed immeasurably to the ideas in this volume, and we have a deep and lasting gratitude for them and what we have learned from our interaction with them.

Wes, Loren, and Randy
Overview and Main Ideas in Sacred Theory

Scholars have been studying religion in families for over a century, but this research is still “in its infancy” (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005, p. 193). It also has a number of serious limitations because it is “awash in data without adequate theoretical interpretive lenses,” and “without a unifying coherent theory to interpret those complex empirical findings, the reader is left with the daunting task of unraveling conceptual spaghetti.”

This book improves this situation by adding new qualitative and quantitative data and creating a conceptual framework and general theory (or model) about when, how, and why sacred matters are helpful and harmful in families. We build on the earlier literature, and to do this we need to describe what has been accomplished and ways it can be broadened and enhanced.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND THEORIES

The Research

There have been three generations or stages in this research. The first generation began in the late 1800s and lasted till the end of the twentieth century. The studies during this stage focused on the correlation religious affiliation and participation have with family outcomes such as marital satisfaction and stability, and there were several hundred studies. There also have been several reviews of this research. Therefore there is not a need for another detailed review, but there is a need to evaluate the methods, findings, and reviews and identify ways the theory and research can be enhanced and broadened.

The studies have large differences in quality, but the questions, methods, and findings remained the same for about a century. The review by Mahoney,

---

1 Snarey and Dollahite (2001, pp. 647 and 649).
2 The reviews were by Marciano (1987); Thomas and Cornwall (1990); Holden (2001); Mahoney et al. (2001); Snarey and Dollahite (2001); Dollahite, Marks, and Goodman (2004); and Mahoney (2010).
Pargament, Tarakeshwar, and Swank (2001) found that the strength of relationships with distal indicators is fairly low, but more specific and proximal aspects of religion were more strongly related. They also concluded that the relationships were "as impressive as the predictive power of other global risk factors of child or family problems that are highlighted in sociological and epidemiological research" (p. 584).

Scholars gradually realized that this first generation of research did not appreciate the "complex nature of spirituality," and that much of it involved "simplistic, dichotomous thinking about the helpfulness versus harmfulness of religion" (Krumrei, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2009, pp. 380–381). This led Thomas and Cornwall (1990) to suggest that "it is time for the social scientists to ask more systematically what it is about religion that contributes," and further that "multivariate models will have to be developed where multiple dimensions of both family and religion are measured in an effort to assess how these variables may be related" (p. 989).

This plea by Thomas and Cornwall and two papers by Mahoney et al. (1999, 2001) started the second generation of research. The second stage focused on ways more specific aspects of religion are related to a variety of processes and outcomes. It also began the study of these relationships in diverse families and unique conditions. For example, a study by Marks, Nesteruk, Swanson, Garrison, and Davis (2005) found that specific religious beliefs and practices were related to longevity, health, and well-being in African American individuals and families. The research in this stage also included studies about how specific aspects of religion help families cope with special needs, stressful situations such as disabilities and serious illnesses, and sexual abuse. There also were studies about ways religion helps promote healthy development in adolescents and ways religious rituals influence activities in families.

Ways the Research Can Be Improved and Expanded

The first two generations of research were a valuable beginning, but the research in them also

---

3 Mahoney et al. (2001) did a meta-analysis of 94 studies and found that when the research focused on distal factors such as affiliation with a religious denomination, the relationships were consistently positive but not strong. The correlation coefficients averaged around .05. However, when studies gathered data about the frequency of attendance at religious services, the correlations were a little higher, averaging .07. Relationships that dealt with more proximal aspects of religiosity such as the importance of religion, frequency of prayer, and Bible reading were still higher. They averaged around .15, and some of them accounted for as much as 46% of the variance.

4 For example, Butler, Gardner, and Bird (1998); Butler, Stout, and Gardner (2002); and Beach, Fincham, Hurt, McNair, and Stanley (2008) focused on ways prayer is helpful in conflict resolution and therapy. Studies also began to examine ways forgiveness influences a variety of family processes such as marital satisfaction and conflict resolution (Fincham, 2003; Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004; Fincham et al., 2002; Worthington, 2005). Research also focused on ways religious practices are related to fidelity, commitment, conflict avoidance, and conflict resolution (Dollahite & Lambert, 2007; Lambert & Dollahite, 2006, 2008).

5 Mahoney et al. (2001, pp. 583–584); Gall, Basque, Damasceno-Scott, and Vardy (2007); and Dollahite, Marks, and Olson (1998).

6 Smith (2003); Marks (2004); and Loser, Hill, Klein, and Dollahite (2009).
has a number of limitations, and there are ways it ought to be improved. Ten of these ways are relevant for the theory and research in this volume:

1. Only a few of the specific and proximal characteristics of the sacred have been studied, and there are many other aspects that deserve attention.
2. The research has focused only on the existence and strength of the covariation in the relationships. Therefore it provides little information about other characteristics of the relationships such as the shape of nonlinear relationships, thresholds, interactions, and the length of time for the effects of change to appear.
3. Little attention has been given to the role of contingencies or contextual factors, and Sullivan (2001) and Dollahite and Marks (2009) suggested that they are important.
4. “More in-depth and conceptually based measurement tools are needed to develop a richer, deeper understanding of the mechanisms that tie religion to family life” (Mahoney et al., 2001, p. 585).
5. There is a need for more integration. The previous studies are helpful, “but as a whole they present the contemporary researcher with a disjointed and fragmented account for religious influences” (Smith, 2003, p. 17).
6. Krumrei et al. (2009) argued that the majority of the research does not appreciate the complexity of spiritual phenomena, and they and Baucom (2001) suggested that more attention should be given to “specific religious beliefs and practices within the context of concrete life situations” (Krumrei et al., 2009, p. 380).
7. The research provides few insights about why some families with high religiosity are not successful and some families with low religiosity are successful. It is likely that some of the reasons for this are that some people are religious in some ways and not in other ways, that some of their behavior is consistent with their religious ideals and some is not, and that these patterns have been overlooked.
8. Most of the research has focused on ways religion is helpful, and more attention should be given to ways it can be harmful.
9. The research has focused almost exclusively on traditional families. Therefore little is known about the role of religion in nontraditional patterns such as same-sex coupling and parenting, nonmarital parenting, cohabitation, stepfamilies, polyamorous lifestyles, and single lifestyles.
10. The research in the first two generations focused on wholesome aspects of mainstream religions in the United States. These religions have experienced several reformatations and counterreformations in the last several centuries, and many of them are more family-friendly than they were in the past. There have been many historical and cultural situations where religions have been neither noble nor helpful, and this means the existing research provides information about only a small part of the many different kinds and aspects of religion that have existed historically, that exist in the present, and that can exist. Therefore there are important limitations.
to the conclusions and generalizations that can be made from the existing research, and there is a need for additional research about a broader range of religions and cultural conditions.

The Theories
During the first generation of research, there were no significant attempts to create theories about why, how, and when religion helps or harms families. Therefore the empirical research far outstripped the ideas about what the research means and how the ideas in the research can be applied by families and by professionals. This led to several unfortunate conditions. Scholars “found it difficult to integrate the findings from the various studies of families and religion because of the absence of a unifying theoretical perspective” (Snarey & Dollahite, 2001, p. 649), and the area was “correlation rich but explanation poor” (Marks & Dollahite, in press). Also, as Sullivan (2001) suggested, “the largest impediment to a more complete understanding of how religiosity affects marital functioning is that many studies have been exploratory in nature or empirically driven rather than theory driven” (p. 611).

Several groups began to create conceptual and theoretical models in the second generation. One group was led by Mahoney and Pargament. They focused on “mechanisms through which religion may influence family relationships” (Mahoney et al., 2001, pp. 585–591), and suggested that psychosocial functions and the substantive elements are two different mechanisms. They also theorized that both of these mechanisms have the potential to facilitate and impede healthy family processes; and they developed a number of ideas about how substantive and psychosocial aspects of the sacred help and hinder marriage and parenting.

They also developed the relational spirituality framework that differentiates between processes in family formation, family management, and family transformation. This framework also has a number of ideas about ways relationships with the divine, perceptions of relationships as spiritual, and relationships with spiritual communities can be helpful and harmful (Mahoney, 2010). Many of the ideas this group developed are explained in more detail in later chapters and incorporated into the more general theory that is constructed in this volume.

A second group that began to create conceptual and theoretical models was Dollahite and Marks and their colleagues. They conducted qualitative interviews with a sizeable sample of racially diverse, highly religious families and middle-aged couples living in different regions in the United States who were affiliated with the three major Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. The data from these interviews provided the basis for a model that describes how contexts influence processes and processes influence outcomes, and this model was one of the starting points for the theory building in this volume.

---

7 Most of the theoretical contributions of this group are in Mahoney et al. (1999, 2001, 2003); Mahoney, Pargament et al. (2005); Pargament (1997, 2007); Pargament and Mahoney (2005); and Mahoney (2010).

8 Most of the theoretical contributions of this group are in Dollahite and Marks (2005, 2009), Goodman and Dollahite (2006), Lambert and Dollahite (2006, 2008), and Marks (2005, 2006).
Smith (2003) also developed a model about the role of religion. His goal was to create “a more coherent, systematic account of how and why religion exerts significant positive effects on American youth” (p. 17). His model focused on three dimensions in the influence of religion: moral order, learned competencies, and social and organizational ties. His “moral order” and “social and organizational ties” are very similar to Mahoney’s substantive and psychosocial dimensions. We have used Mahoney’s terminology because the concepts are slightly more familial, whereas Smith’s model deals with social processes generally rather than family processes.

The models that were created in the second generation dealt with all four of the key questions in theory building. The most elementary question is the what question raised by Thomas and Cornwall (1990): “What it is about religion that contributes” to family outcomes? (p. 989). Two of the other questions are the why and how questions. As Bengtson, Acock, Allen, Dilworth-Anderson, and Klein (2005) described: “This we believe is the purpose of theorizing—trying to understand and explain the why and how beyond the what of our data about families” (p. 4, italics in the original).

The fourth set of questions are the when questions. They deal with the conditions or circumstances that influence when aspects of the sacred are helpful and harmful, when relationships exist and don’t exist, and when aspects of relationships such as shape and strength vary. They also deal with the “interactions” emphasized by Snarey and Dollahite (2001, p. 649).

**Ways the Theories Can Be Improved and Expanded** The theory building in the second generation was valuable because it provided more elaborate, useful, and insightful conceptualizations. It also moved the field well beyond the zero-order correlations between religiosity and valued outcomes; and provided new insights about the role of proximal and specific aspects of religion. However, the theories also have a number of limitations, and there are several ways they ought to be improved and expanded. Nine of these ways are relevant for this volume.

1. The previous models focused mostly on what and how questions, and little attention was given to the why questions. Ideas about why are elusive and speculative; and they are never complete or final in the study of phenomena such as religion and families, but they help provide understanding and insight. They also help with the application of the ideas, help in improving and revising theories, help stimulate new research, and help satisfy intellectual curiosity. Future scholarship should give more attention to the whys.

2. The previous theorizing also paid little attention to the when questions. The part of the Dollahite and Marks (2005, 2009) model that describes contexts began dealing with the when questions, but little has been done with how and why contextual variables make a difference in different social groups, in different situations, or at different points in the individual or familial life cycle; and scholars have not yet dealt with other issues such as the length of time for effects to appear when changes happen.
3. The conceptualization of the main terms remains problematic. Concepts such as religion, religiosity, spiritual, spirituality, and sacred have not been interdefined in an effective way, and they are used differently by different scholars. They continue to have overlapping, multiple, and sometimes ambiguous meanings. Therefore more work is needed to improve the way the basic terms are interdefined and operationalized.

4. The theory building also has remained close to the empirical data. This means the models are mini-theories or midrange theories, and there is little in this broad, general, and inclusive theorizing that is relevant in understanding the role of the sacred generally or in a wide variety of social conditions.

5. The theory building has focused primarily on the role of forgiveness, prayer, sacrifice, sanctification, and rituals; but there are many other aspects of the sacred that have been studied that ought to be included in the models, and there are many other aspects of the sacred that have not been studied that should be included.

6. The theorizing remains fairly fragmented because most of the work focuses on the role of specific phenomena individually rather than their role together, in interaction, as parts of an integrated whole, or as parts of a larger set of processes.

7. The theorizing deals with the existence, direction, and strength of relationships, but it does not deal with the more complicated aspects of relationships, such as their shape if they are nonlinear, interactions, and thresholds.

8. Like the research, the theorizing has been about wholesome aspects of mainstream religions in the United States. This means the theorizing is not very broad or general, and it should be viewed only as ideas about the role of positive aspects of a few religions in rather limited cultural and historical conditions. This also means the initial theorizing does not have ideas that are general and abstract enough to be relevant for and applicable to a wide range of historical, cultural, and religious conditions.

9. The theorizing has not been integrated with the conceptual frameworks or general theories that are widely used in the field (White & Klein, 2008). Another alternative would be to create a new conceptual framework or theory that is general and inclusive, but this also has not been done.

Thus the initial theory building in this area has been a valuable beginning, but it is only a beginning and has a number of limitations. There also are many ways and places where improvements can be made, and there is a need, in the cyclical relationship between theory and research described by Merton (1957) and Klein (2005, p.17), to improve and expand the theory and research. These are the goals in this book, and we try to move this area into a third generation. The first step is to improve the conceptualization.
CONCEPTS

One of the first challenges we encountered was the ambiguity and controversies in the way key terms such as religion, spiritual, spirituality, and sacred have been defined in the scholarly literature. This confusion in the conceptualization created a number of problems as we tried to integrate the previous research and theorizing. Therefore, we focused first on these conceptual issues to try to find better ways to label, define, describe, illustrate, and operationalize the basic terminology.

Religion is the term that has been used most widely to describe the part of reality we are interested in. It is used the most in research and theory and in the names of journals; it is used to describe sections in the American Psychological Association and the National Council on Family Relations; and quite a number of scholars prefer this term.9 Others prefer terms like spiritual or spirituality, and these also have been widely used.10 However, all three of these terms have so much ambiguity and so many meanings and connotations that they have serious disadvantages.

A number of scholars have tried to improve the definitions of these terms,11 but there is still little consensus, and they continue to be used in a variety of ways. We eventually concluded that when dealing with general, broad, and inclusive theories, the most useful term is sacred. Some of its advantages are that it is general and abstract and is relevant for a wide variety of cultural and denominational differences. Also, it is inclusive and broad while at the same time being fairly precise and focused. It is not as vague and all-inclusive as spiritual, and it shares useful elements with the term religion without including many aspects of religion that are of little interest to most scholars. It also avoids a number of the complicating connotations that come with the other terms. The result is that sacred has more advantages and fewer complications and disadvantages when thinking theoretically, and we and a number of others prefer it.12 Another indicator of the value of this term is that some who prefer terms like religion and spirituality turn to the term sacred to define what they mean by the other terms (Mahoney, 2010). We particularly like the term sacred matters, which was introduced by Pargament and Mahoney (2005, p. 179).

It is difficult to create precise definitions of the primary terms in general theories, but it seems important to summarize our working definition of sacred. It refers to the parts of the human experience that are sufficiently awe inspiring that they transform the thinking and feeling of individuals from the ordinary, mundane, and routine into what is perceived as holy, hallowed, and sacrosanct. This transformation leads to high levels of reverence, adoration, deference, and respect.

---

9 Young (1995) and Onedera (2008) are examples of scholars who prefer this term.
10 Spiritual or spirituality are the primary concepts in Richards and Bergin (2005), Pargament (2007), Walsh (2009), and Mahoney (2010).
11 Cashwell and Young (2005); Pargament and Mahoney (2005); Paloutzian and Park (2005); Pargament (2007); Zhai, Ellison, Stokes, and Glenn (2008); Walsh (2009); Swenson (2009); and Mahoney (2010) have all described the confusion in the terminology. Each of them has tried to improve it, but their proposed solutions have had little impact on later efforts.
12 Berger (1967), Nottingham (1971), Bailey (1998), Bowker (2000), and Swenson (2009) are examples of others who prefer the term sacred.
These experiences include but are not limited to divine, heavenly, otherworldly, transcendental, numenal, and spiritual experiences and beliefs; and they frequently but not always provide the basis for religious experiences and religiously motivated behaviors.

One aspect of this definition is that a person cannot define a sacred experience for another person because the sacred is personal. Often those with similar experiences gather to share the results of their experiences; and they sometimes attempt to encourage or recruit others to have similar experiences. Multiple people in some groups may have such experiences, but the sacred is ultimately experienced, perceived, and defined by the individual. People can be coached to recognize certain feelings and experiences as “sacred,” but in the end, it is the individual who ultimately experiences and judges the authenticity of the sacred.

One way of clarifying the way we conceptualize the sacred is to describe ways the term is similar to and different from related terms such as religion, spiritual, and spirituality. Some parts of religion are sacred and some are not; and some parts of spirituality are sacred and some are not. Therefore the term sacred includes some but not all aspects of religion and some but not all aspects of spirituality.

The term religion refers to organized, institutionalized, and denominational belief systems, practices, scripture, rules of worship, and institutionalized values—that is, the complex set of practices and ordinances by which humans derive order about the religious and how they fashion their actions. It generates doctrine, symbols, ethics, rituals, and performance expectations. It is often built on and around sacred experiences, but sacred experiences also can be disconnected from religion.

Religion is a less general concept than sacred because it is closely tied to organizations and behavior. Therefore religion is more easily operationalized by paying attention to which churches people join and their behavior as they respond to their beliefs and “search for significance in ways related to the sacred” (Pargament, 1997, p. 34). This means that focusing on measurable aspects of religions can be helpful in empirical research because such actions are close to what can be observed. However, the characteristics of religion that make aspects of it measurable also make it difficult to think more generally when using this term by being more abstract and general and rising above denominational, organizational, and behavioral aspects. Therefore the term religion is not very helpful in trying to create theories that are broad, inclusive, and relevant for a wide range of cultural and historical diversity.

The term sacred, on the other hand, has broader scope and does not connote or denote anything about behavior because it refers to relatively abstract experiences, perceptions, beliefs, or attributions. Conversely, the result of the broad and abstract nature of the term sacred is that it is not as helpful with empirical research because the logical connections between observations and the sacred are so distant—but it is easier to rise above cultural, denominational, historical, and situational differences and create understanding and insights into what, why, how, and when aspects of the sacred help and harm in society and in families, and why, how, and when it doesn’t make a difference when people wish it did.

Our definition of the sacred is also quite different from spiritual and spirituality, which are broader, more inclusive, and variable. They also are more vague,
subjective, personal, and difficult to define; and they refer to less institutionalized aspects of the human experience because they can include walking in the woods, football at LSU, listening to music, going to an art gallery, enjoying a sunset, or watching a butterfly emerge from a cocoon. Because so many aspects of the spiritual and spirituality lie outside the primary concerns in our research and theory building, we prefer to focus on the role of sacred matters.

Sacred experiences often involve emotion, but they also are different from many emotional experiences. People can have an emotive and special experience watching a sporting event, seeing a moving play about key social issues, or even attending a wonderful concert with stirring music. Those experiences become “sacred” only when a personal transformation occurs and the experience morphs from ordinary to holy.

Another issue about this conceptualization is whether the sacred is a part of reality. Some people believe the sacred is real in an absolute sense, and others believe it is imagined rather than real. We are among those who believe there are sacred realities that are important in an absolute or ultimate sense. But questions about whether these absolutes exist cannot be resolved with scholarly tools, and sacred processes make a difference in families whether they are real or imagined. Therefore sacred theory is primarily about the phenomenological aspects of the sacred, but they are an important part of reality. As James (1902) argued more than a century ago, “Name it the mystical region, or the supernatural region. . . . Yet the unseen region in question is not merely ideal, for it produces effects in this world” (p. 399). He also went on to explain that “that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself, so I feel as if we had no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal. . . . God is real since he produces real effects” (pp. 399, 400, emphasis added).

This principle was broadened and further developed by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918) and Thomas (1923), who argued that a situation perceived as real is real in its consequences. This leads to the conclusion that the phenomenological reality of the sacred leads to important consequences—whether they exist in a noumenological sense or not.

Another aspect of these conceptual issues that deserves more elaboration has to do with the parts of the human experience that are given the most emphasis in the study of the sacred. The social sciences traditionally have focused primarily on cognitive, behavioral, affective, and relationship parts of the humane, and these are important in studying the sacred, but there is an aspect that in later chapters will be emphasized more than cognition, behavior, affect, and relationships. It is what happens in what is usually conceptualized as the human “heart.” When there are beliefs, perceptions, or attributions about the sacred, they are experiential and

---

13The difference between noumenological and phenomenological is a conceptualization developed by Immanuel Kant. He used the term noumenological to refer to the absolute existence of reality that is independent of human observation, perception, or definitions. Therefore humans do not have direct access to the nature of noumenological reality. Phenomenological reality refers to the perceived and constructed human definitions about reality. Phenomenological perceptions of reality come from reason, empirical observations, and/or other sources of knowledge.
involve the heart in addition to these other phenomena. This part of the conceptualization of the sacred is difficult to describe clearly because it is so difficult to define phenomena such as the human heart, but because it is difficult doesn’t mean it isn’t important or real. Ideas such as having a hard heart or a soft heart, or something touching the heart are important when dealing with the sacred, and the term sacred is much better at identifying and describing these phenomena than terms like religion. Even though these parts of the human experience are elusive and difficult to define precisely, they are so important in our theorizing that this book is primarily a book about the heart and the experiential parts of being human. This is another reason we find the term sacred more helpful in our theory building than terms like religion and spiritual.

Even though the theory in this book is about and largely derived from the sacred, we do not turn scholarly inquiry into a religious activity or experience, or incorporate what philosophers call mystical epistemologies into scholarly inquiry. The theory in this volume merely uses ideas that are phenomenologically from and about the sacred.

As we shift the conceptualization and theorizing to a theory about sacred matters in families rather than focusing on religion, religions, spiritual, or spirituality, we recognize that different perspectives exist. We do not argue that any particular definition or version or approach is truer, better, more complete, more adequate, or more defensible than others. Most of the world religions have a great deal in common with regard to the sacred regardless of their differences; and a central thesis in this book is that the quality of theory and research about families will improve and be more useful and cumulative when scholarship focuses on the nature and influence of the sacred.

We also note that all of the perspectives about the sacred, including our views, are limited and provide only a partial, incomplete, and sometimes inaccurate understanding of sacred phenomena. Further, each sacred perspective is influenced by its unique historical and cultural context, and each has disadvantages and inadequacies; but scholarship that focuses on the role of the sacred taps into aspects of reality that, when wisely used, are valuable in helping most people accomplish their family objectives.

A final aspect of the definition of sacred matters has to do with the sources or reasons for sacred experiences and perceptions. These sources can be theistic or nontheistic. Theists have many reasons for believing in the sacred, and those who do not believe in god(s) also have experiences that are so awe-inspiring or transcendental that they create a sense of reverence, awe, respect, and holiness. For example, many who do not believe in god(s) are so committed to ideals such as liberty, equality, and freedom that they are sacred. Another example is the widespread view that Ground Zero in New York City is sacred for many people in ways that are independent of beliefs in god(s). These differences are important because the ideas in the theory that is constructed in

---

14 Das (1947) and H. Smith (1992) assemble impressive evidence for these similarities.

15 Pargament and Mahoney (2005, pp. 183–188) described a number of theistic and nontheistic sources of sacred beliefs and perceptions.
this volume are valid, relevant, and important for both theistic and nontheistic views of sacred matters. Even if one argues that the sacred is not universally experienced or if some people have little experience with the sacred, it is universally important because everyone interacts with others who experience the sacred in important ways.

FOUR GENERAL IDEAS

After making these conceptual refinements, we began the process of trying to improve and expand the theorizing. Our goals were to use ideas in the previous research and theorizing, several strategies in the methodology of theory building,\(^\text{16}\) and some new data and different kinds of data to build a conceptual framework and theory that (a) are more general, inclusive, and integrated than the previous theorizing, and (b) will provide better, more testable, and more useful explanations that are relevant for a wider range of religious approaches, specific situations, and cultural and historical conditions.

The main question we were concerned with was a slightly more general and complex version of the question asked two decades ago by Thomas and Cornwall (1990, p. 989): “What is it about the sacred that helps and harms families?” (emphasis added). The first thing we did as we tried to find answers to this question was to examine the previous literature and analyze and reanalyze the data in our observations and interviews to extract as many truth assertions or theoretical propositions as possible. This led to a list of about 50 generalizations that dealt with ways various dimensions of the sacred influence family processes and outcomes. These ideas dealt with the role of processes such as prayer, forgiveness, sacrifice, rituals, sanctification, turning the other cheek, patience, not being judgmental, being merciful, and so on. These propositions provided some understanding and explanation, but they had little generality, explanatory power, and integration. We then tried to integrate at least some of them by moving to a higher level of abstraction and grouping them under more general ideas. This led to a list of about 50 generalizations that dealt with ways various dimensions of the sacred influence family processes and outcomes. These ideas dealt with the role of processes such as prayer, forgiveness, sacrifice, rituals, sanctification, turning the other cheek, patience, not being judgmental, being merciful, and so on. These propositions provided some understanding and explanation, but they had little generality, explanatory power, and integration. We then tried to integrate at least some of them by moving to a higher level of abstraction and grouping them under more general ideas. This helped, but provided only a little bit of integration and additional explanation. We therefore tried to move to an even higher level of abstraction and seek more general ideas that would (a) be relevant for a wide variety of historical, cultural, and religious situations, (b) provide general propositions from which less general ideas could be deduced, (c) integrate the previous research and theory, (d) provide better explanation and understanding, (e) create ideas that are testable with empirical data, and (f) be an effective beginning point in theorizing about the sacred in families.

\(^{16}\)The major contributors to this methodology have been Braithwaite (1953); Zetterberg (1965); Nagel (1961); Glaser and Strauss (1967); Stinchcombe (1968); Blalock (1969, 1971); Dubin (1969); Hage (1972); Gibbs (1972), Burr (1973); Glaser (1978); Burr, Hill, Nye, and Reiss (1979); Strauss and Corbin (1990); Denzin and Lincoln (1994); Gilgun (2001, 2005); Knapp (2009); Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, and Karnik (2009); and Jaccard and Jacoby (2010).
As we sought these more general ideas, we reexamined and reanalyzed our data and the 50 propositions in a variety of ways to see if they could be combined, integrated, or changed in ways that would provide clues about more general propositions or lead us in other ways to more general ideas. This led to a number of combinations and changes that did not prove fruitful. We also searched for ideas in other aspects of religion such as symbolism, traditions, religiosity, rituals, dogma and doctrine, and participating in joint activities; but they also did not help answer the key question.

**Proposition 1**

Eventually, as we were working with the less general propositions, the ideas about *sacred matters* and *sanctification* that were introduced by Mahoney et al. (1999, 2001; Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003) and expanded by Pargament and Mahoney (2005) started us on a line of analysis and reasoning that became more fruitful. They theorized that people can view many things as sacred, and that when phenomena are perceived as sacred this leads to individual and relational benefits, costs, and risks (Mahoney et al., 2003). Their ideas led to several studies about ways sanctification influences sexuality, parenthood, and health patterns and outcomes such as marital satisfaction and reactions to divorce, and they argued that the process of defining aspects of life as sacred “has several implications for human functioning” and “should be of keen interest to the psychology of religion” (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005, p. 180).

We found some of these same patterns in our data. Some people we observed and interviewed believed aspects of their life were sacred, and these attributions or perceptions gave these phenomena substantial power in their lives. Others participated in religious activities for less sacred reasons, such as parental pressure or because it is the socially acceptable thing to do, and these less sacred religious parts of their lives had less power—less influence on other aspects of their lives.

As we analyzed these ideas about sanctification and our data, we found several ways to expand the previous theorizing, and several studies in other disciplines provided helpful insights. One of the helpful studies was Weber’s (1904) analysis titled *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. His data suggested there was a connection between an aspect of Calvinism and the rise of capitalism. According to Calvinism, one’s work ethic and subsequent economic successes are tied directly to one’s “election” by God. This notion places a high value on work and ties it to devotion and a desire to be chosen by God, and this contributed to the rise of capitalism because devoted people worked hard to achieve economic success and thereby prove their election. The empirical part of Weber’s analysis dealt with religion and religious behavior, but his theoretical explanation was the more abstract idea that it was sacredness that made the difference because it was

---

17 Mahoney et al. (1999); Mahoney, Carel et al. (2005); Mahoney, Pargament et al. (2005); Murray-Swank, Pargament, and Mahoney (2005); and Krumrei et al. (2009).
the attribution of sacredness to an aspect of life that is usually viewed as mundane that gave it power.

These ideas regarding the power of the sacred were also in the writings of Bīrunī in the eleventh century (Kamīar, 2009), in the work of other anthropologists (Murdoch, 1934), and in the early psychological literature (James, 1902). In the empirical work by each of these scholars, they focused on aspects of religion and religious behavior, but when they sought explanations of their findings they turned to the more general and abstract idea that *sacredness increases the power of phenomena*. The results are not always beneficial, but they are powerful.

The same reasoning was used in Durkheim’s volume on *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1915). He analyzed the role of religions in a number of primitive cultures, and the idea that guided his work was also that the sacredness of aspects of religion gave them a powerful influence on other parts of reality. His summary of this idea is more individualistic than familial, but it is very insightful:

> The believer who has communicated with his god is not merely a man who sees new truths of which the unbeliever is ignorant; he is a man who is stronger. He feels within him more force, either to endure the trials of existence, or to conquer them. It is as though he were raised above the miseries of the world, because he is raised above his condition as a mere man…” (Durkheim, 1915, p. 416; italics in the original).

Durkheim’s summary of this idea is so close to poetry that Dave Dollahite arranged the flow of the ideas into this version:

```
The believer who has communicated with his god
Is not merely a man who sees new truths
Of which the unbeliever is ignorant;
He is a man who is stronger.
He feels within him more force,
Either to endure the trials of existence, or to conquer them.
It is as though he were raised above the miseries of the world,
Because he is raised above his condition as a mere man...

Emile Durkheim
```

Our reasoning extended this theoretical idea beyond the initial proposition that sanctification leads to individual and relationship benefits, costs, and risks because it provides insight into *why* sanctification makes a difference. It also adds the idea that sacredness creates *salience and power* in the ways phenomena influence other processes and outcomes because when these same phenomena are not perceived as sacred they have less potency.

Different parts of the previous literature and the patterns in our data dealt with aspects of this general idea in slightly different ways. Figuratively speaking, this was like having a number of threads that were similar but slightly different. Separately, the threads did not form a pattern, and they provided little help in
answering the key theoretical question we were asking. However, as we thought about the various ways these ideas have been used and can be used, this led us, with the help of some colleagues and students, to think about this cluster of ideas in a more general and abstract way; and we saw a pattern we hadn’t seen before—a relationship we had not seen before.

To continue the analogy of threads, some of the threads are old and widely known, but they can be woven together in a new way that creates a new pattern—a new idea. The pattern provides an idea that is different from the individual studies, ideas, or threads. Also, it is greater than the sum of the parts because it provides a more general and abstract proposition that offers new insights, new explanations, and new understandings; and the central idea helps answer the key theoretical question we were asking. The resulting idea then became the most fundamental truth assertion in what we now call sacred theory, and it is:

**Proposition 1:** Experiencing parts of the human experience as sacred gives them a unique, unusually powerful, and salient influence.

A simpler way of summarizing this proposition is that the sacred matters, and, as one colleague put it, it matters a lot—irrespective of cultural differences, historical conditions, religious persuasion, and even participation. This idea is so powerful, relevant, and useful that it has the same keystone quality in our theorizing that the invisible hand had for Smith (1776), survival of the fittest had for Darwin (1859), conditioning had for Pavlov (1927), and unconditional positive regard had for Rogers (1951).

There are a number of characteristics of the sacred that help explain why Proposition 1 is true and helpful. The sacred inherently inspires awe and reverence. It deals with the parts of life that are unusually significant and sacrosanct, and that generate such deep respect that they lead to worship, commitment, devotion, dedication, and veneration. It deals with the extraordinary and hallowed rather than the ordinary. It inspires, amazes, and leads to wonder. It deals with the supernatural and numinous. Also, as Bahr and Bahr (2009) suggested, it deals with the transcendent, and as Pargament (2007) suggested, it deals with “boundlessness” and “ultimacy” (p. 39). It provides ideas and beliefs about the BIG questions in life that deal with the nature, meaning, and purposes of reality and human existence. Therefore by its very nature, the sacred occupies a unique, salient, and powerful place in the human experience.

We theorize that this idea is sufficiently powerful that experiences with the sacred make a great deal of difference, even in circumstances where people are not aware of the effects of their participation. Therefore Proposition 1 deals with more than just perceptions, beliefs, and discovery. It is an idea about experiencing and what the experiencing does to the heart. We also theorize that this idea is so general that it is relevant for many different perspectives about religion, religions, and the sacred. It also is sufficiently general that it is relevant for a wide range of cultural and historical conditions and a wide range of personal circumstances and perceptions; and this generality and profundity make this idea a strong beginning point in a theory about sacred matters in families.
Unfortunately, even though several versions of this idea were widely appreciated in the early years of the social sciences, the skepticism and ambivalence among scholars toward ideas about the sacred became so powerful by the middle decades of the twentieth century that the notion that the sacred matters was ignored in the conceptual frameworks and theories that became the dominant approaches in studying families (Hill & Hansen, 1960). And, unfortunately, this pattern continues up to the present time because this idea is not in any of the many summaries in the last half century of the widely used theories in family studies. We think it is wise to resurrect this proposition, give it new life, and find new ways to use it to generate ideas that will help scholars and practitioners better understand what helps and harms families.

It is impossible to tell with the tools that are available in scholarly inquiry whether sacred phenomena are salient and powerful because phenomena such as God(s), heaven, hell, devils, life after death, and salvation exist noumenologically and phenomenologically, or just phenomenologically. For many of our purposes, however, this distinction is not central because the sacred is salient and powerful in families either way. Beliefs about whether sacred phenomena exist noumenologically are matters of faith, and scholarly inquiry does not have the tools to answer such questions. However, studying the ways families are influenced by experiences with the phenomenological aspects of the sacred can and ought to be a central concern in the study of families.

Many aspects of the sacred are salient and powerful for people of faith because they believe these aspects originate with God and are part of God’s eternal, transcendental, and otherworldly plans for humans. But there are many who do not believe in the noumenological existence of God; yet many of them still have sacred phenomena in their lives, and many of the ideas in this book are relevant for them. Their beliefs are founded on secular rather than divine or theistic reasons. The basis for these ideas does not seem to us to be well articulated in the worldviews that undergird these philosophies, but these nontheistic experiences with the sacred have salience and power—whatever the source.

To summarize, the idea that experiences with sacredness create salience and power—irrespective of cultural differences, historical conditions, religious persuasion, and participation—is a truth assertion or proposition that became an assumption on which the rest of sacred theory is built. It is the most valuable and defensible intellectual bedrock we have seen for a theory about sacred matters in families.

There are several other analogies that illustrate the central and fundamental role of this idea in sacred theory. In a sense, it is an umbrella idea that covers all of the other ideas in the theory. In another sense it is a cornerstone idea. Or, as one colleague clumsily but insightfully put it, it is the kind of idea that provides the “overarching underpinning.” If this idea is not true, sacred theory is irrelevant.

The summaries after Hill and Hansen’s (1960) were by Christensen (1964); Nye and Berardo (1966); Broderick (1971); Burr et al. (1979); Holman and Burr (1980); Thomas and Wilcox (1987); Winton (1995); Ingoldsby, Smith, and Miller (2004); Chibucos, Leite, and Weiss (2005); and White and Klein (2008).
Proposition 2

Proposition 1 is so general that it is relevant for many aspects of the human experience, and it provides explanation and understanding about a wide range of phenomena. It can be applied to crosses, crucifixes, tombs, birthplaces, ideals, dreams, memories, hopes, experiences, emotions, books, poetry, revelations, legal systems, education, governments, and many other aspects of the human experience. However, in our theory building we are not interested in these other domains or phenomena, so they are residual. Rather, we are interested in ideas that can help families be effective. Therefore we applied this idea to family processes, and this led to a slightly less general truth assertion or proposition that is the second of four general ideas in sacred theory. It is:

Proposition 2: Experiencing parts of family life as sacred gives them a unique, unusually powerful, and salient influence in families.

This proposition provides valuable understanding and explanation about why the research has consistently found significant correlations between religious beliefs/activities and valued family outcomes. Also, based on the persuasive evidence about Proposition 1, from which this proposition is deduced, Proposition 2 also provides insight, explanation, and understanding about why scholars and practitioners who want to understand and explain what makes families effective and who want to develop programs to help families ought to give this idea a central role in their theories, research, and intervention programs.

Proposition 3

It would be easy to theorize that the parts of life that are perceived to be sacred are constructive and helpful in families because the vast majority of the previous research focused on the beneficial effects of wholesome aspects of widely respected religions; and the findings have demonstrated again and again that many aspects of the sacred are positively related to effectiveness in families. And, unfortunately, some of the earlier theorizing and much of the earlier research seems to be implicitly based on this generalization.

However, such a generalization ignores the reality that people can use aspects of the sacred in adaptive, good, and helpful ways, but they also can use them in maladaptive, bad, and harmful ways. Propositions 1 and 2 do not help with these aspects of the sacred.

19 The idea that aspects of the sacred can be harmful was first described by Edmonds, Withers, and Dibatista (1972) and later expanded by Levinger (1976). It was further elaborated and illustrated by Scanzoni and Arnett (1987), Pargament (1997, 2007), Mahoney et al. (2001, 2003), Mahoney (2010), and Griffith (2010).
more value-laden differences because they deal only with the idea that aspects of
the sacred are unique, salient, and powerful.

This reality led us to focus next on what it is about the sacred that is helpful
in some circumstances and harmful in others. To help us find ideas about this
question, we again turned to the data from our interviews and observations, and
we eventually concluded that it is not the presence of the sacred, the presence
of religion(s), or the presence of religiosity that is important in understanding when
aspects of the sacred are helpful and harmful in families. It is variation in what
people do as a result of their ideals and beliefs about the sacred that is important;
and there can be (and is) considerable variation in what people do as a result
of the sacred, even within the same family and same religious tradition. These
insights led to the idea that became the third general proposition in the theory:

**Proposition 3:** It is variation in what people do as a result of their ideals and
beliefs about the sacred that determines whether the sacred is helpful or harm-
ful in families, and it is not the mere presence of religion in general or global
religiosity that makes the difference.

In other words, it is how family members act as a result of their sacred beliefs
that matters. It is not simply global religiosity per se or being a particular type of
family such as highly religious, orthodox, or conventional. It is how family mem-
bers use aspects of the sacred that is crucial because people can be religious gener-
ally and behave in some ways that are not helpful, and they can be low in religiosity
and behave in ways that are helpful.

One of the earlier theoretical contributions that helped us arrive at this idea
was Pargament’s (1997) theory of religious coping. He focused on adaptive and
maladaptive coping strategies people can use as they deal with stressful events and
transitions. He and his colleagues developed an instrument called the Religious
Coping Scale (RCOPE) to assess methods people use to cope (Pargament & Koenig,
2000), and this instrument has been used in subsequent research (Krumrei et al.,
2009, p. 376).

Pargament’s theorizing and research about how people “use” an aspect of the
sacred parts of their life to help them understand and cope with stressors was use-
ful to us because it helped us focus on one way of using aspects of the sacred. We
then extended this reasoning to think about a broader array of ways people use
what Mahoney et al. (2001) called the substantive and the psychosocial elements
of religion, because we were interested in what happens in the routine and ordinary
living in families, rather than just strategies that are used in coping with more
profound and atypical stressors. As we found ourselves thinking about a broader
array of ways of “using” the sacred, this was helpful because it included what family
members do with the various aspects of the sacred in the ordinary, daily, everyday,
and normal management of their lives and how variation in these ways of behaving
changes the probability of other family processes and important family outcomes.


Proposition 4

As these ideas became clearer to us, they helped us focus on what seemed to be the next important question. That is, what is it that can help us understand when behaviors that result from the sacred are helpful and harmful?

As we examined and reexamined our interviews and observations, we eventually found an idea that is helpful in at least partially answering this question. It is the idea that ways of behaving that result from sacred matters can be consistent or inconsistent with a cluster of widely shared goals in families; and when behavior is consistent with these goals, it tends to be helpful. Conversely, the more behaviors are not consistent with these goals, the more they tend to be harmful. This insight then became the fourth general proposition in the theory:

---

**Proposition 4:** The more behavior is consistent with a cluster of widely shared goals in families the more it tends to be helpful, and the more it is inconsistent with these goals the more it tends to be harmful.

---

The value of this idea depends on what are viewed as the widely shared goals in families. There are many perspectives about the goals that are important in families, and there is more than a little controversy about them. Therefore it seems like a good idea to describe the cluster of goals we’ve used in our theory building and how and why we’ve used this particular group of goals.

This is another area where it is challenging to determine which parts of complex sets of ideas should be described first and which later. In some ways it would be better to describe the widely shared goals first and then the origins of and basis for the goals. On the other hand, there are several reasons why it would be better to describe first the origins and basis and then the goals themselves. This means we have another chicken-and-egg dilemma, and there are advantages and disadvantages to both of the strategies. Unfortunately, we had to choose one or the other of the strategies because both sets of ideas cannot be described first.

After evaluating the pros and cons of the two alternatives, we decided to describe the goals first and the basis for the goals second. Another complication is that the description of the origins of and basis for the goals is sufficiently complex that if we included them in this chapter, they would make this chapter way too long and complex. The goals are based on a number of metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological assumptions and on a model or definition of family. These philosophical assumptions and the model of family are too complex and involved to be included in this book, but they are published on the Internet, and we are submitting them to journals. The title of the publication containing these technical and philosophical parts of sacred theory is “Assumptions in Sacred Theory,” and it is available at http://familycenter.byu.edu/Assumptions.dhtml.

Our observations and interviews suggest there are at least five areas where there are widely shared and important goals in families. How families strive to reach these goals plays out in infinitely variable ways in different cultures and

http://www.psypress.com/sacred-matters-9780415887458
subcultures, historical conditions, and technologies; and there is great variation in how effectively they are carried out. Our list is not exhaustive, but it is relevant for most people, and the ideas in it are sufficiently general that they are relevant for a wide range of cultural, religious, and historical conditions. We don’t view these goals as an ultimate or comprehensive list that ought to be etched in stone. They are working tools that help provide a manageable model that we have found helpful in our theory building. The goals deal with (a) providing helping patterns, (b) meeting emotional needs, (c) providing a home, (d) balancing stability and change, and (e) avoiding and coping with “undesirables.”

Providing Helping Patterns   The irreducible core of family life is the cluster of experiences, connections, and emotions that derive from the birth process (Davis, 1984), and they create a need for complex patterns of helping. Infants and young children need vast amounts of help for many years if they are to survive, learn, grow, and thrive; and helping patterns continue to be important through the entire human life cycle if people are to successfully learn to understand, face, and manage the opportunities, challenges, and transitions that are encountered in the human life course. These helping patterns include the socialization of young and old, and they also include much more.

Families experience successes with regard to these helping patterns when they effectively help family members prepare intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and socially to make the routine transitions in the life course that are expected in their community. This includes producing children who can be launched from their family of orientation and effectively assume adult responsibilities as they approach adulthood. It also includes preparing family members to let go of their children when they are ready to be launched, and for the changes that come with aging. Helping patterns also include helping family members acquire the ability to be creative, resourceful, humane, and resilient when they encounter unexpected and undesirable experiences. Failures result when families provide so little help that members are not able to effectively make these transitions and adjustments. These successes and failures can also be partial and involve many levels or degrees of effectiveness.

Meeting Emotional Needs   Another area where there are widely shared goals for families, and where families encounter successes and failures, is in helping meet a group of the deep and meaningful emotional needs. Humans have deeply felt strivings for connection with others in intimate and caring relationships that involve support, love, and commitment. Public, occupational, and civic settings, and other secondary relationships tend to be transitory, variable, and optional, meaning that people tend to move in and out of these relationships, thus limiting individuals’ ability to satisfy and meet their deeper human emotional needs in those settings. Therefore the deeper emotional needs of humans are only (at best) partially met in the transient, secondary, bureaucratic, public, less personal, and often market-oriented conditions that exist outside families and homes.

Many of the more important and deeply experienced emotions are best met in families that provide intimate, nurturing, stable, bonded, and humane relationships that involve “whole” persons across the entire life course. Family life is, for
many, the part of the human experience that provides an optimal place for meeting many of these emotional needs.

Families vary a great deal in how well they meet emotional needs. Some families are so chaotic and dysfunctional that the people in them never learn how to create and maintain intimacy and closeness in supportive, tender, caring, enduring, bonded, and loving relationships. People who grow up in such families are often limited in their ability to experience affection, bonds, encouragement, predictability, celebration, and a sense of belonging and meaning. Success occurs when families are able to meet these emotional needs; failure occurs when these emotional needs are not met.

There are some human emotional needs that are met more effectively in the public realms than in familial parts of life. For example, family life is not very effective in meeting needs for novelty, excitement, adventure, unpredictability, and adrenaline-producing adventures. These needs or desires are usually met more effectively in nonfamily settings. The emotional needs that family life is especially suited for meeting are those for such things as connection, love, caring, nurturing, support, intimacy, stability, learning, coping, healing, and continuity.

Providing a Home  A third area where there are widely shared goals in families is in creating, providing, and maintaining a home—in both a literal and ideal sense. The ideal condition in nearly all societies has been for the family to create and maintain homes. A home is where people can be “off-stage” (Goffman, 1959). It is the place “where they have to take you in.” Other living arrangements such as dormitories, ships at sea, orphanages, rest homes, military housing, and foster homes are all temporary arrangements that are helpful when people do not have access to a family living in a home, but these are typically temporary or transitory substitutes that are less than ideal.

Families encounter successes with regard to this part of life when they consistently give and receive love and care, and manage what Maslow (1954) refers to as physiological needs—as well as coping with other needs relating to illnesses, accidents, exceptionalities, and bridging and bonding with other parts of life such as economic roles and resources, schools, medicine, law, entertainment, and the like. Thus success occurs when a family-in-a-home provides a sense of affectionate belonging and connection that helps people avoid feeling that they are alone, isolated, and lonely. Home is a success when it is a healthy base of operation—the center of people’s lives and the place from which they move out to their more temporary, voluntary, and role-specific activities in work, sports, church, friendships, neighborhoods, and so forth. Metaphorically, the ideal family/home is the hub of the wheel of life, and spokes go out to other parts. Failures occur when people do not have a family-in-a-home that can accomplish these many parts of the ideal human condition, when they are not managed well, or when important parts of them are poorly accomplished.

Balancing Stability and Change  A fourth area where there are widely shared family goals is in maintaining an effective balance between stability and change. Humans need enough stability to have predictability, safety, and a sense
of order; but we also need the capacity to adjust to inevitable change, including ever-changing developmental shifts and an array of less predictable demands. A measure of stability, perhaps even considerable stability, is essential for the long-term, intimate, close, warm, nurturing, private, personal, and cherished parts of life that exist in families.

Families tend to be successful when the core relationships in them are permanent and predictable—and when they also have enough flexibility and adaptability that they can change when it is wise or needed. Failures are likely when there is chaos and unpredictability, and when people find it necessary to terminate marital and family relationships (particularly when these terminations recur; see Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). This aspect of family life can be operationalized with rates of divorce, disowning, running-away, desertion, and so on.

Avoiding and Coping With “Undesirables” Another area where there are widely shared goals for families has to do with undesirable experiences. There are a number of conditions in human life that are undesirable, and people try to avoid them. Some examples are accidents, illnesses, tragedies, loneliness, nihilism, and emptiness—rather than meaning, connection, intimacy, and purpose. The undesirables also include academic failures, addictions, gang involvement, violence, incest, delinquency, criminal behavior, unwanted pregnancies, rejection, and many forms of abuse such as sexual, physical, drug, and emotional abuse.

Successes tend to occur when families find ways to avoid these undesirables, and when families are resilient and effective in coping with undesirables when they cannot be avoided. Failures occur when families are not helpful in avoiding undesirable conditions, when they contribute to undesirables, and when they are not helpful in being resilient and effective in coping with them when they cannot be avoided.

Research shows that neighbors, coworkers, and friends can be (and often are) helpful to a degree in coping with these challenges, but the limits of these more transitory, voluntary, and superficial relationships typically tend to be reached quickly (Lee, 1987). There are important limits to how much people can turn to secondary relationships such as roommates, friends, and coworkers when they encounter serious challenges; and effective family life is well suited to providing the more involved and long-term caring, nurturing, support, and helpfulness that are needed when serious challenges are faced.

WAYS OF BEING HELPFUL AND HARMFUL

The ideas in the four general propositions provide insights about why sacred matters are salient and powerful in families and what it is about the sacred that determines whether it is helpful or harmful, but they provide little insight into how the behaviors that result from the sacred are helpful and harmful. After the above ideas were clear enough to describe them, we found ourselves wanting to better understand this “how” question; and this led us to examine our data further to try to glean insights about how harmfulness and helpfulness play out in families.
Our data suggest there are at least four ways sacred matters can be harmful in families. One of these ways appeared in several earlier studies in which it was found that aspects of the sacred were a mixed blessing rather than a simple matter of making things better or worse. These studies revealed that the sacred was simultaneously related to desirable and undesirable outcomes in complex ways. An example of this simultaneous relationship appeared in one study that found that sanctification was helpful in some ways yet also exacerbated psychological distress when there were negative life events such as a loss, violation, and/or desecration that were viewed as divine punishment (Pargament, Magyar, Benore, & Mahoney, 2005). The same finding also appeared in a study that focused on the role of sanctification in coping with divorce (Krumrei et al., 2009). The sanctification of divorce was positively related to adaptive coping strategies, but also positively related to spiritual struggles and depression. Phrased differently, perceiving an endeavor as sacred raises the stakes. If the goal or endeavor is realized, the meaning of the success is magnified; if the endeavor (i.e., marriage, parenting) fails, the pain and sense of failure are more acute.

A second way the sacred can be harmful is that family members sometimes misunderstand religious teachings or get carried away with them in ways that lead to excesses or extreme ways of behaving that are harmful. For example, parents sometimes “sanctify” excessively strict, punishing, or controlling behavior. Also, some become so committed to their own ideals that they reject and disown children who choose ways of believing and behaving that the parents do not think are right; and these patterns can be tragic and harmful.

A third way sacred matters can be harmful was identified by Mahoney et al. (2003). They pointed out that experiences such as unanticipated developmental transitions, uncontrollable crises, violations by family members, loss, conflict, and intrapsychic and institutional barriers can “challenge preset notions about how sacred family relationships operate” and that the resulting dissonance between the reality and expectations of sanctified family relationships may trigger feelings of spiritual failure, thereby exacerbating individual and relationship maladjustment (p. 229).

A fourth way the sacred can be harmful is that some ideals and beliefs about the sacred advocate ways of behaving that create harm. Our reading of history as well as our experiences and observations have led us to believe that there are many ways this occurs. One example is that some religious teachings have created and maintained gender discrimination and inequality in many cultures for millennia.20 Another is religiously endorsed racial and ethnic discrimination. The idea of “manifest destiny” in nineteenth-century America was viewed by many as a sacred idea, yet the devastating impact it had on the families of Native Americans was a horrific tragedy. Also, two of the authors have lived in the southern part of the United States, Wes in the 1950s and Loren now, and we have seen examples of the

20Gallagher (2003) and Wilcox (2004) demonstrated that several religious traditions have been changing in recent years in the way they deal with gender issues to decrease discrimination and find ways to be more consistent with the needs and goals in families and with such ideals as equality, freedom, justice, and liberty.
religious sponsorship of racial hatred, disenfranchisement, and discrimination that creates harm in families and communities. It was more obvious in the 1950s and is now more subtle and implicit. Another example is that beliefs about the sacred have led to many wars and controversies that have caused harm in many families. Religions also have contributed to disfigurement, mutilations, and other forms of bodily abuse—even human sacrifice. A final example is that beliefs about the sacred are a primary source and vehicle of the current worldwide problems with terrorism that cause profound harm to nations and families, and there are many more situations where unhealthy patterns have been created and perpetuated by religions, at both societal and familial levels.

It is easier to identify ways the sacred is helpful. From the beginning of recorded history, humans have turned to many sources of ideas in their search for answers about life’s most meaningful questions. They have turned to reason, and to many types of empirical observation. They have turned to art, literature, and philosophy. They have turned to the mystical and, more recently, many have turned to science to try to answer the profound and meaningful questions of life—a source not ideally suited for answering questions of meaning.

A large percentage of the human race also have turned to ideas about and from the sacred in this search. Sometimes they have turned to patterns in the earth and sky—especially to patterns with the sun, moon, planets, and stars—and viewed them as sacred. They also have turned to many different views about gods and the divine, and have provided some of the most subjectively satisfying and defensible ideas, ideologies, and answers, some of which are among the most enduring ideas and answers. The ideas from and about the sacred have been modified and refined over the centuries, and they will undoubtedly continue to evolve and change.

The traditions in the major world religions have been the most influential, powerful, and enduring, and it is not an accident or coincidence that these ideas also have become quite consistent with the needs of families. As people have turned to ideas about and from the sacred to provide answers, the answers that are less consistent with the needs of family life have gradually become less appreciated and tended to wane.

The result is that the major religious traditions provide ideas and answers that have a fundamental compatibility and helpfulness with the basic and enduring goals in family life, and it is likely that this compatibility has increased over the millennia. It also is likely that this compatibility will continue to increase in the future. The result of this symbiotic relationship between the sacred and familial is that people who are comfortable with the major religious traditions also tend to be more successful, as a group, than those who, for whatever reasons, tend to be less comfortable with the existing traditions about the sacred. A result is that when social scientists began gathering survey data in the 1930s about religiosity and family success, they found positive correlations.

This pattern is a form of a cultural survival of the fittest. The ideas that are not compatible with the goals in families tend to be rejected and fade, whereas the beliefs and approaches that are consistent with the goals in families are retained and emphasized. And over successive generations the more successful ways persist.
and flourish. In this winnowing process, sacred ideas help individuals and families find meaning, create order, and relate in ways that result in effective and successful homes and families. This relationship between the sacred and familial is extremely complex and multifaceted, and involves many different aspects of the sacred and the familial. It evolves and changes over time and in different social, economic, climatic, and governmental circumstances, but these are some of the reasons aspects of the sacred are helpful in families.

Thus we suggest that the most profound way the sacred can help families is that it can provide a set of ideas about the “big picture” in the human experience, and the ideas in the major world religions can provide clusters of time-tested ideas and answers about the most fundamental *whys* of life. These ideas in turn provide ideas that give meaning and purpose to existence. They provide ideas about the higher and most noble aspects of what it means to be human. They provide ideas that help create order, integration, and harmony in life generally and in family life in particular.

We are therefore suggesting that the sacred parts of the human experience provide individuals and families with a complex array of deeply meaningful ideologies, perspectives, values, ideals, prescriptions, hopes, strategies, limitations, constraints, proscriptions, and emotional experiences. These parts of the human experience are deeply ingrained into human minds, and, more importantly, into their hearts, and the insights provided by and about the sacred thereby help meet some of the most fundamental and basic needs of families.

These theoretical ideas seem helpful, but they are only a beginning in trying to better understand why the positive relationship between religiosity and valued family outcomes has so consistently recurred. It is likely that as future scholarly inquiry examines and tests these ideas, they will need to be refined and modified further because our first attempt to articulate them is undoubtedly limited and inadequate in many ways. There are still many questions about the why and the how that remain unanswered, so this is an area where there is a need for additional theorizing and research; but these ideas provide the beginnings of an explanation of the reasons sacred phenomena tend to help families.

**THE BASIS**

If we were to merely describe the above improvements and expansion in the theorizing and not describe the experiences and data that helped us arrive at them, there would be little evidence for their validity and they would have little credibility. Therefore it seems wise to also describe examples of our observations and some of the comments from our interviews because they provide data that undergird the validity of the ideas in the general propositions. A detailed description of the methods that were used in our interviews and observations is in Chapter 15, and some of them are described in other publications such as Dollahite and Marks (2009).
Interview Data

The majority of the people we interviewed indicated that the behavior in their families was fairly consistent with their religious ideals and led to fairly predictable results, but some interviews described situations where some who were generally religious did not behave in ways that were consistent with their ideals. For example, a recently married man in his middle 20s made the following observations about the home he grew up in:

Our family was so religious when I was growing up that we went to church every week. My mother was clearly the leader in this, and she was intense in the ways she brought God and religion into our home. She did it in a very demanding way that was often critical and cynical; and when one of the kids did something they shouldn’t, she’d talk about how God was displeased and we ought to feel guilty. She put more guilt on us than you can believe, and it was painful the way she treated us. Unfortunately, the words that best describe the way she treated us are brutal and abusive. I was the oldest and was an obedient child, so I didn’t get yelled at as much as the others, and it was sad the way she treated my sister and brother who weren’t as inclined to do what she wanted. Now that I’m away from the home and able to make my own choices, I don’t want to have anything to do with her God and with her religion. There was little love and a lot of anger in our home, and my little sister hates my mother so much that whenever she can she stays with someone else on weekends when our mother is around the house. My brother is now away from home . . . and his resentment toward my mother and feelings of always being pressured and never loved has been getting in his way.

This description of a mother who was religious but also unkind and unloving shows the severe price the family paid for her inconsistencies. We elaborate more in Chapters 6 through 9 on ways being loving helps families and being unloving hurts families, but this situation illustrates that it is not global religiosity that matters. What matters is how people act—and whether these actions are consistent with the widely shared goals in families of behaving humanely, ethically, and morally consistent with their religious zeal and ideals.

A narrative from another individual illustrates the happier side of the ways family members use aspects of the sacred and their consequences:

In my brother’s family, they always put the gospel first in their lives. They go to church every week, and they make donations, and they make sure they serve others, and they do it as a family, and I think these things help them. They are also so kind and gentle with each other, and their happiness is exponential. I’ve never seen them unhappy. They have a common goal in their life that affects them in so many ways, and it brings them closer together and unifies them as a family. Whenever my family is around them, we feel happy too.

The following (and contrasting) description by a midwestern woman in her 70s illustrates how people who attend church regularly and view themselves as religious can behave in destructive ways, and how this leads to undesirable consequences:
I love my father, but he also caused a lot of pain in our home. He always set very high standards for others, and when people didn't meet up to his view of what they ought to do he was very rejecting. My husband is a good man, but he also has his faults, and [my husband] was never good enough for my father. Dad criticized him all of the time to me and to everyone else, and he was never warm and accepting of him. My husband has grown and matured in many ways over the years and overcome many of his faults, but Dad went to his grave without ever accepting him as a son-in-law. As our children grew up, each one of them gradually turned away from their grandfather, and by the time Dad died none of our children wanted to have anything to do with him. Several of our children have also struggled in other ways, and I'm confident that the influence my father had in our home was an important source of their challenges. One of our sons struggled about so many things that he eventually took his own life as a 20 year old. I still love my father in ways, but there has been a lot of hurt, and it has been hard.

This father/grandfather who regularly attended his church was so rejecting, critical, and mean that he reportedly created a great deal of damage in his home, to his children, and even to his grandchildren. This further illustrates the pattern that what matters is not general religiosity but what people do with the more specific aspects of their religion.

A less extreme example of the negative side was described to us by a middle-aged father who, decades later, was still troubled by the hypocrisy he perceived:

[My parents] were members of the synagogue and they went semi-regularly, all the holidays and some Friday nights, all the big events. They were key members of the synagogue. They might have fallen . . . into the trap of people who acted more spiritual in synagogue than they actually were. . . . They did it outwardly because . . . you need to be seen there . . . but I saw other sides of them and I thought, “This isn’t very uplifting behavior.” Maybe we [my wife and I] are sending mixed messages to our kids as well. We may be no different from my parents; we don’t follow the letter of the law all the time either, not even close. That kind of hypocrisy bothers me.

Many of the theoretical concepts, ideas, and supporting narratives in this volume capture and illustrate ways the integrated use of the sacred benefits families. However, the positively integrated use of the sacred does not capture the whole spectrum of experience or truth. In these narratives we see how the inconsistent integration of sacred matters (e.g., through coercive or authoritarian means or misunderstandings) or a refusal of parents to live professed religious ideals can contribute to lasting harm—a common problem that has been referred to by one researcher as behavior-belief incongruence (Marks, 2002, 2004). Conversely, there are some people and families who would not be categorized as “highly religious” who model and integrate noble ideals in prosaic ways. A father of a son with severe developmental disabilities spoke of his own father in this way:

My father was not a religious man but one of the things that I remember [from my childhood] is when we were working on the yard [at our] cabin in
Minnesota. We children would get tired and leave and go play, but my father would always stay until the job was done. It would always impress me that I would be playing with my friends, and then I would still see my dad working on the same job, until the job was done. It always impressed me and has carried throughout my life that that’s what men do. They accomplish the job. . . .

I think the feeling that I have is, “Yeah, [having a child with severe disabilities] is tough, it is a disappointment. This is not fair.” But I think that this is what you are dealt and this is what you play with. You don’t just sit and whine and moan about it. You just get up and go to work and do the things that you need to do and deal with it. As far as spiritual things, I see from my father through his example that this is my job (to be a good father). I am to finish the job, so no matter what it takes or how long it is, you just stick to it and go to work, until the job is done. It is the father’s responsibility—you are responsible, you are the support.

Observations

Our interviews provide useful data about many family processes, but living in a family provides insights about processes that are not revealed with interviews and questionnaires. Our observations in our own families and the families of the relatives, friends, students, and colleagues we have come to know well have revealed patterns that provide persuasive evidence about the propositions in this chapter.

One of these patterns is that when family members have put their love and devotion in the nonsacred parts of life, many of them have reaped more than a little bitter fruit. In several instances when we have seen family members turn to lifestyles away from the sacred, they have had a short-term sense of freedom and liberation that was greeted with enthusiasm, idealism, and optimism; but as the years passed, many of them encountered failures, including many different aspects of life, health, and death. We’ve seen it with drugs and depression, delinquency and rebellion, rejection and incarceration, loneliness and abuse, violence and betrayal, hate and poverty, disfigurement and premature deaths, suicides and deception, betrayal and sabotage, unhappiness and crime. Sometimes it has been with divorces and the abandonment of children, and sometimes with children being removed from homes by courts and other government agencies. It has been with the destruction of health and relationships, and tragic levels of physical, emotional, and mental pain. We are not trying to be melodramatic. We are talking about individuals we have known and loved and our close-at-hand observations.

Most of the time, people are fairly consistent over the years in terms of how they approach and integrate the sacred. However, we have observed a few situations where there have been dramatic changes in the way sacred matters were used, and we also have observed the consequences that tended to follow. Some have turned to the sacred, and the changes in their lives were not a panacea. They still encountered challenges and difficulties with illnesses and the life-changing transitions that are involved when people change the amount they value the sacred parts of life; but overall, we have seen increases in successes in some of the most meaningful parts of life and decreases in failures. The following two narrative accounts illustrate both a turning from and a turning toward the wise and harmonious use of the sacred:
One of my sisters decided as a teenager to live her life away from God and the church. A few years later her life fell apart. She had an affair, and her first marriage ended in divorce. She then had another affair with a different man and became pregnant for the second time while she was still in her teens. She married the second man, who also had two children from a former marriage. It was never a very enjoyable marriage, and she was the mother of three small children, and then they soon had another child. Shortly after the fifth and then a sixth child was born, and she couldn't cope with her situation. She tried to take her life, eventually lost her second marriage, spent time in a mental hospital, and eventually the state gave all of her children to other families. She wandered from one relationship to another for decades, a broken and unhappy woman searching for peace, love and happiness, but never finding them. Sometimes she married the man she was living with and sometimes she didn't. During these years, she lived a wild life and abused her health in a variety of ways.

When she was in her 60s, alone and with such poor health that she couldn't take care of herself, she found herself in a care center. She eventually was able to re-establish relationships with her children, but they have not become very deep, meaningful, or enjoyable relationships. Gradually, she realized she needed to make changes, and she tried to change her life and repent of the many wrongs in her life. As she returned to her spiritual roots, and tried to make peace with her God, her life gradually became more tolerable and eventually relatively enjoyable. She now lives several states away, and goes to church every week in the center, even though she is in such poor health I don't know how she does it or even stays alive. We talk on the phone often, and I try to show the love I feel for her and try to help her in any way I can, and we see each other as often as we can. She will probably carry a lot of pain to her grave, but her last years have had more peace and happiness than she knew for many years.

[My] brother got into trouble with the law when he was about 15. It started out with minor things, but eventually it became more serious, and he was placed in a correctional facility. When he got out, he didn't want anything to do with God or the church, and he stopped associating with the family. He moved to another state and lived quite the worldly life. Over the years, he had a number of affairs and had children with several different [women], but none of his families lasted very long or brought him or others much happiness. He never even knew about some of his children until they were adults. Alcohol, drugs, business problems, and run-ins with the law continued to be serious problems for him.

Members of the family would occasionally learn where he was living and try to visit him, but he didn't show much interest in them and didn't seem very receptive to their love. Later, when he was in his 60s, he came to a family reunion one year with the woman he was living with, and he seemed to enjoy being around the family more than he had. About two years later, he contacted the family and told them he was making some big changes in his life. He was married and was going to church. Even though his wife was a member of a different church, they went to church together and he was trying to put his life in order and do what was right. He was repenting and trying to be forgiven by
Heavenly Father. He became active in his church and lived for about four years after this, and the last four years of his life were the happiest time of his life.

Our observations suggest that major changes such as these in the way people deal with the sacred are rare. The usual pattern is continuity in what people do with the sacred. Those who have lived in ways that were consistent with the ideals in sacred traditions have experienced relatively more successes and fewer failures. On the other hand, those who have not lived in these ways have had less stability in their family life, some finding complex patterns of successes and failures, and others finding few successes and many failures. The following two narratives illustrate ways different but stable lifestyles brought different results, one where the wise use of the sacred was helpful and one where a different lifestyle led to undesirable consequences. One father recalled:

My wife and I both grew up in families that were effective in many ways, but there was also quite a bit of cruelty and pain in both families. As we were dating and starting our family, we talked about what we wanted and both of us wanted to pay more attention to God and his ways than was done in the families we grew up in. So, we read and studied in the scriptures to try to understand and draw close to God and do the kinds of things he taught. We have now been married over a half century and our grandchildren are starting their families; and we are so grateful we put God and his ways at the center of our family. We have had such a loving and close relationship with each other and with our children and grandchildren that they are a beautiful part of our life, and we try to be a beautiful part of theirs. Our children have tried to live the same way we try to live, and they are doing a better job of it than we did. Now, our grandchildren are all, so far, choosing the same patterns. We’re counting our blessings . . . and are keeping our fingers crossed.

****************************

Our oldest daughter didn’t choose to follow the lifestyle that we tried to teach her. She married a fellow that wasn’t involved at all in religion, and she adopted his style. Unfortunately, their family life has not been very enjoyable. They fight a lot and have come close to divorce several times. Their children are now mostly grown, and two of them are into the drug culture and don’t have anything to do with us or their parents. One of the sons in the family had a baby without being married and he seems to be more interested in his drugs and gambling than trying to be a good father or providing a good home. We worry about what kind of life the child [our great-grandchild] will have.

Another example of this was offered by another individual, who reported:

One branch of our families was generally religious in that every member the family was active in their church and they went to church every week, but they also were good at holding grudges. It got so bad between two brothers that whenever one of them learned a certain brother was going to show up at a family gathering he would not attend, and both of them went to their graves with feelings of animosity and hatred.
The families of the children and grandchildren of these two brothers were dramatically different from the families of their more forgiving siblings. The children of the unforgiving brothers had resentments and animosities after they formed their own families, and the next two generations have had little contact, closeness, or love in their relationships with each other, as well as a number of other problems such as alcoholism, substance abuse, and crime. The brothers had five other siblings who were more inclined to forgive, and the families of their children and grandchildren were dramatically different. They were all closer and more loving. They remained close to each other throughout their lives, held reunions and other gatherings often, and were supportive and nurturing. It is likely that some of these differences are due to other things, but it also seems that the difference in the ways these two brothers used an aspect of the sacred (forgiveness) and the ways their siblings used this aspect was substantial, and this difference seems to have had an impact on the problems and successes in the two next generations.

Another related narrative from our sources reads:

My father never learned how to forgive. All those who wronged him were SOB's and he let everyone know about it. His lack of forgiveness led to many hard feelings and resentments and interfered with feelings of love and kindness. And, in the same family, my mother was always loving, thoughtful and kind, and quickly and fully forgave all who wronged her. The contrast between my father's unremitting lack of forgiveness and the anger and hate this created [as opposed to mother's] healing balm was dramatic and powerful, and the ways these differences had an influence on those around them was a striking and potent influence in my life. I have tried to be like my mother and avoid being like my father, but it has been like swimming upstream.

We could add many other examples of these patterns from our interviews and observations, but these examples are enough to be persuasive, and they seem like enough for this chapter. To summarize, the data from our observations and interviews suggest that when family members deal with sacred matters in ways that are consistent with the widely shared goals in families it leads to desirable outcomes in families, and when they behave in ways that are not consistent with these goals it tends to lead to undesirable outcomes—not just for an individual but also for families, and often families across generations. Many of the specifics in how this plays out in specific parts of family life along with many more examples of these processes are described in Chapters 2 through 12.

OTHER IMPROVEMENTS

There are several other ways we think the theorizing in this volume improves and expands the earlier theorizing. Both the research and theory about religion in families have suffered from fragmentation, typically focusing on (at most) a few parts of the sacred and (at most) a few parts of the familial at a time. Neither the empirical nor theoretical work has been part of an integrated, general-level conceptual framework or theory. In the following chapters we integrate the
previous research and theorizing about how sacred matters help and harm, and include all of it in a more comprehensive and coherent conceptual framework and theory. Also, we expand the theory by including a sizeable number of sacred phenomena that have not been parts of the previous theorizing and research.

An additional way we improve and expand the theorizing is with a rather extensive analysis of the philosophical assumptions and paradigmatic strategies we have used. They are described in *Assumptions in Sacred Theory*, a publication that is available at the http://familycenter.byu.edu/Assumptions.dhtml; and we have submitted them to a journal as well. This analysis will, hopefully, help us and others be better able to help assumptions be more consistent with theories and research. Thomas and Wilcox (1987) argued that much of the theory building about family unintentionally used more positivist views of the nature of family phenomena than the authors realized, and more than was wise. We hope that by being more explicit about the assumptions that are the intellectual underpinnings in our theorizing, we and others will avoid some of the incompatibilities and inconsistencies that have appeared in much of the earlier scholarship (Slife & Williams, 1995).

**A VISUAL SUMMARY**

We and many others find it helpful to have simple, summarizing, visual models of the ideas in general theories. Therefore we have devised the diagram shown in Figure 1.1. Proposition 1 is at the top because it is the most abstract and general idea. Propositions 2–4 are an interrelated cluster of ideas that are slightly less general, and they are in the box below Proposition 1. The rest of Figure 1.1 provides a glimpse into the ideas in sacred theory that are described in Chapters 2 through 12. The 5th proposition asserts that loving relationships are helpful in families, and Propositions 6–22 are less general ideas that are components or aspects of what it means to be loving. Propositions 23–30 are less general principles that deal with processes that are not subsets of what it means to be loving.

The figure also illustrates how hypotheses can be deduced from the theoretical ideas and tested in empirical research.

**SUMMARY**

This chapter began by summarizing and evaluating the previous empirical and theoretical literature, identifying a number of limitations in both as well as ways both empirical and theoretical scholarship on sacred matters in families can be improved and expanded. Next, there was an analysis of the conceptualization for the main ideas in this area of inquiry, and we suggested that the term sacred is more effective in building a general theory than terms such as religion, spiritual, and spirituality—even though these other terms have been used the most in the previous research and theory. We suggested that the complications and disadvantages with terms like religion and spirituality have caused problems and hampered the quality of the earlier scholarship.

This chapter then described a cluster of ideas that create a new conceptual framework and a general theory in family studies that uses ideas from and about
Chapter 2 begins this elaboration by discussing ways forgiving makes a difference in families.

Figure 1.1 Summary of the main ideas in sacred theory.

The sacred matters. The most general and inclusive idea in the theory. It is an umbrella idea for the rest of the ideas in the theory.

2. Perceiving parts of family life to be sacred gives them a unique, unusually powerful, and salient influence in families.

3. It is behavior tied to the sacred that is powerful in families.

4. This behavior is helpful when it is consistent with a group of widely shared goals in families and it is harmful when it is not.

5. Being loving is helpful in families.

Six less general principles that are parts of what it means to be loving.

6. Forgiveness*
7. Kindness
8. Respect
9. Mutual interest
10. Integrity
11. Service

Five less general principles that are parts of what it means to be loving and are helpful in coping with disagreements.

12. Peacemaking
13. Patience
14. Cooperation
15. Emotions
16. Unity

17. Mercy
18. Compassion
19. Judgmental
20. Reciprocity
21. Help others
22. Repent

23. Loving God
24. Prayer*
25. Sacrifice *
26. Sanctification *
27. Generations
28. Morality
29. Social networks
30. Sacred rituals

Six less general principles that are parts of what it means to be loving and are helpful in coping with undesirable behavior.

31. Help others
32. Cooperation
33. Emotions
34. Unity
35. Patience
36. Peacemaking

Eight other less general principles derived from the more general principles.

Everything in the theory rests on metaphysical, ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions.

Hypotheses deduced from the theoretical ideas and tested with data.

The line represents inductive and deductive logic that connect the different levels of generality.
There is a section in each of the next 11 chapters on ways to apply the ideas in each of the chapters. We do not have an “Applications” section in this chapter because the ideas in this chapter are so abstract and general that they are not directly applicable. The way the ideas in this chapter can be applied is to derive or deduce the less general ideas in Chapters 2 through 12 from these general and abstract ideas, and the less general ideas in these other chapters have considerable relevance for families, theorists, researchers, educators, and practitioners.